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ABSTRACT

A study examined how newspaper editors resolve issues relating to rumors--that is whether to cover stories which may turn out to be false. The "mutilated boy" rumor was chosen for its antiquity and endurance, its powerful theme, and its ability to create intense anxiety in a community. Thirty-three of the 86 editors who responded to the questionnaires reported encounters with the "mutilated boy" or similar rumors. The encounter questionnaire revealed that 14 of the 20 editors who said their newspaper printed something about the rumor also reported their readers stopped calling and the rumors quickly died. Fifty-one of the 53 editors who responded to the hypothetical questionnaire said they would assign someone to check out the rumor if their papers started receiving calls from readers. Most agreed ignoring rumors generally is best but that they should be debunked if they create widespread hysteria. Those who favored printing a debunking story about the rumors favored it for the same reason other editors opposed printing it: responsibility to the community. No evidence was found to suggest that the press contributed to the spread of rumors. The summative picture is one of concerned editors, even though there are few written policies to guide their decisions. The fear of making matters worse is evident in the steadfast presence of the minority of editors who said they did not or would not print such a story. (Three tables of data and 23 notes are included.) (MG)

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DEBUNKING THE MUTILATED BOY

A Study of Newspaper Editors and an Inflammatory Rumor

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Presented to the Newspaper Division at the convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Washington, D.C., 1989

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The six-column headline in the Wichita Eagle-Beacon said it better than most: "That 'Hot' Rumor Around Town is 800 Years Old."[1] It surmounted a 32-column-inch story that described the rumor of the Mutilated Boy as:

> A white boy was attacked in a restroom at Towne East Square shopping center by two older black males who castrated him and left him lying in a pool of blood. He's in a local hospital, not expected to live, and police have hushed up the incident, fearing racial violence.

Staff writer Jon Roe went on to describe an earlier version of the rumor from Chaucer's 14th Century The Canterbury Tales in which the victim was a Christian boy who had been killed by Jews living nearby. In Wichita, the article continued, "hundreds of persons believed it," and "scores of persons have called law enforcement authorities with the story."

The article quoted the county sheriff as saying "We had a similar rumor about four years ago, and there was nothing to that one either," and it quoted a county psychologist as explaining:[2]

> Before, they felt anxiety toward the other race, but didn't know exactly why. Now, that anxiety is explained through the rumor, and they can admit their fear. The rumor allows deeply buried prejudices to become socially acceptable.

As reported, the Wichita incidence of the Mutilated Boy rumor is characteristic of similar visitations in dozens of American cities during a resurgence of the rumor that began in the 1960s and has extended into the 1980s. One of its most notable effects is its often-demonstrated ability to cause something akin to hysteria in the communities it has hit. Another is the fanning of racial emnity. A third is the suggestion that mass media are in league with authorities to cover-up the incident.

The Windsor Star, a Canadian newspaper widely circulated in Detroit during the 1968 newspaper strike there, reported the content of the rumor, in part, as:[3]

> The gruesome crime has been virtually "hushed up." The Detroit newspaper shutdown, now in its third month, has coincidentally assisted this, but the ticking time-bomb riot conditions of Detroit are such that all news media are cooperating to suppress anything of a nature that could explode the Motor City into a riot, more murderous and damaging than last summer's.

Wichita and Detroit were not alone. Newspaper headlines in other cities told similar stories about the Mutilated Boy's sometimes devastating visits. In San Francisco it was "Ugly rumor about mutilated boy in men's room: why it flourishes."[4] In Iowa it was "Ugly Crime Rumor is Absolutely False."[5] In Los Angeles it was "An Ugly Lie, Once Nailed Here, Spreads Eastward to Maryland."[6]

In Louisville it was "Handling of rumors: Great care serves newspaper's readers."[7] In Raleigh it was "Police discount rumor of child's emasculation"[8] and "Calls Flood Police/ Mutilation Rumor Runs Wild."[9]

THE PROBLEM

While describing the spread of the rumor was an objective of this study, the primary purpose was to learn how newspaper editors resolve the journalist issues--both process and principles--relating to printing stories about false rumors or the effects of them, a problem made more vexatious because the decision to print often requires departure from traditional values about best journalistic practice.

The statements guiding this study were:

1. Most newspaper editors would avoid printing a story about a rumor known to be false.

2. But, because of the hysteria often created by this (and closely related) rumors, ethical considerations would make it a difficult newsroom decision whether or not to print.

3. A properly written and adequately displayed piece to debunk the rumor would be effective in ending its word-of-mouth-circulation.

The underlying issue is social responsibility or, more precisely, editors' perceptions of social responsibility. Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw wrote in a two-part series on newspapers and rumors, "The question of whether to publish a rumor is neither academic nor uncommon. Rumors . . . often involve important people and (seemingly) newsworthy events."[10]

He continued, "The right answer--the responsible answer--might seem obvious: Do not publish them if they are not true."

But, what might seem an obvious solution sometimes is not. Shaw went on to observe that publication of a false rumor, properly identified as untrue, is "particularly important if the rumors are causing widespread public anxiety, even mass hysteria . . . ."

Whether a rumor is or is not "properly identified" as false is a crucial issue. Merely labeling something as a rumor is insufficient to deter belief because pre-existing attitudes, such as a pre-disposition to believe something, is more potent than a mere label. Allport and Postman wrote in The Psychology of Rumor that "one cannot kill rumors merely by tagging them," and that "more strenuous methods of refutation . . . are required."[11]

The Windsor Star account of the rumor ran beneath a 130-point Benday overlay, "Rumor," repeated several times. Yet, it was not until the fifteenth paragraph that readers learned it was actually a "preposterous" rumor and not fact.[12] The Detroit Rumor Control Center, which was to receive as many as 1,600 calls a day, noted that callers reporting or asking about the Mutilated Boy rumor believed it was true because they "often said that they had read it as a news story in the Windsor Star."[13]

The matter of proper identification is only part of the greater objection to printing anything about a rumor known to be false. The fear is that readers too easily can read past the evidence refuting the rumor and remember--and thus believe--the substance of the rumor and not the refutation of it. In an article headlined,"How the Public Was Snake-Bitten by a Rumor," Washington D.C. Evening Star staff writer Woody West began an article about rumors with, "Probably the surest way to prolong the life of a rumor is to disclaim it.[14]

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mutilated Boy rumor was chosen for this study for several reasons. First, it is one of a very few rumors that create such intense anxiety in a community that newspapers have often seen fit to publish refutations of it. A second and closely related[15] tale is the Kidnappped Girl (or almost Kidnapped Girl) rumor in which a teen-age girl is accosted in a shopping

mall restroom, drugged (her hair sometimes is cut to alter her appearance) and is kidnapped or, more commonly, almost kidnapped by two "foreign looking" women who intend to sell her into slavery. Her assailants escape after the last-minute intervention by her mother, a friend or a store manager.

A second reason for choosing the Mutilated Boy rumor for this study is its antiquity and its endurance. It has variously been traced back to Syria in the Fifth Century and to Greece several centuries before Christ. In the earliest accounts, Jews were the assailants, although some later accounts blamed early Christians for ritual killing. It reportedly is found in the literature of western Europe, and had a role in Nazi Germany anti-Semitism. It was imported (or re-imported) to United States literature about 1933. In the 1960s, the attack on the Mutilated Boy was by blacks, Hispanics and, sometimes, whites. The Mutilated Boy was the companion of the wave of racial rioting that swept urban centers the second half of that decade and, on and off, it has continued an active residence since.

The third reason for focusing this study on the Mutilated Boy is because of its powerful theme, one that shakes people--often many people--to contact newspapers and law enforcement for confirmation or refutation. The Kidnapped Girl, while less potent, has similar power and also figured in this study. As Rosnow wrote, the "life span of rumors that depend for their survival on isolated events is perhaps short . . . but the symbolic representations seen virtually immortal."[16]

Little appears to have been written about the timing of cyclic rumors. Others have noted that the Mutilated Boy occurs in the press in roughly five-year cycles. However, it may be that it is part of the culture--that it doesn't really "go away" at all--and that would suggest that something besides the

theme of the rumor itself--perhaps increases in racial tensions--accounts for "outbreaks." A six-year study by the Baltimore, Maryland, Rumor Control Center suggests cyclic variation by year and, more strongly, by months within years.

TABLE I -- TELEPHONE QUERIES ABOUT THE MUTILATED BOY

*Rumor - Boys castrated in the bathroom of fast food restaurants and shopping malls in the Baltimore Metropolitan Area.

Verification - FALSE - According to information supplied by the Baltimore City Police Department and The Baltimore County Police Department Offices of Public Information.

	Number of Calls												Total # of Calls *Rumor
YEAR	JAN.	FEB.	MAR.	APR.	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG.	SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	
1980	2	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	6	1	2	6	21
1981	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	8
1982	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	11
1983	10	6	2	2	0	1	0	0	4	5	21	42	93
1984	11	3	2	0	0	0	0	3	3	12	17	28	79
1985	1	0	0	10	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	14

Source: Baltimore Rumor Control Center

It shows the greatest number of calls was in 1983, with 93, but in 1981, only two years earlier, the center received only 8 calls. It also shows that December and January were the months of highest activity, perhaps related to holiday shopping activity, particularly relevant to shopping malls where the boy is usually mutilated and the girl is usually kidnapped. That the summer months were consistently lowest may suggest that children play a role in rumor transmittal; vacation breaks many normal patterns of interpersonal communication.

A review of the literature revealed no controlled field experiments with rumor behavior, and the few laboratory studies involved reception-transmission models oriented to distortion of information. Actually, there are two streams of literature; one of them might be termed the sociology-psychology branch, and the other might be called the literature-folklore branch.

To the former, the Mutilated Boy story is a cyclic, wedge-driving rumor. To the latter, the story is a legend, and "a legend is a rumor that has become part of our verbal heritage."[17] Brunvand observes that the spread of legends is analagous to the dissemination of rumors.[18] Shibutani argues that rumor emerges in ambiguous, problematic situations, and that people become frustrated when attempts to seek reliable information are thwarted. "If enough news is not available to meet the problematic situation, a definition must be improvised. Rumor is the collective transaction in which such improvisation occurs."[19] To which might be added the notion that rumors are like mushrooms; they grow best in the dark.

Similarly, Koenig observes that news has a different dynamic than rumor, and that "the attraction of telling a (rumor) can be eliminated by (publication) which defuses it."[20] His observation, though, comes full circle to the merit and the peril of publishing anything about a false rumor. As Allport and Postman wrote:[21]

> . . .the sharp opposition between news and rumor remains inviolable. The former is characterized ideally by its conformity with secure standards of evidence, the latter by the absence of such conformity. But as clear as this theoretical distinction is between news and rumor, it is not always effective in the minds of the public.

THE SURVEY

A mail survey seemed to be the only practical way to ask many editors about the Mutilated Boy and related rumors, but two problems were anticipated. The span of time being studied was known to be from 1964 to 1985 from clippings and other information. Given the frailty of human memories compounded by changes in duties, job relocations and transfers likely to have occurred in such a period, the decision was made to mail two questionnaires to each intended respondent.

The "Encounter Questionnaire" was intended to survey encounters with the Mutilated Boy or similar rumors that caused widespread public anxiety and resultant telephone calls to newsrooms. The "Hypothetical Questionnaire" asked editors to respond to a hypothetical situation: If the Mutilated Boy or similar rumor cane to your community with the resultant deluge of anxious, sometimes angry and accusatory, telephone calls from concerned readers, how would you (and your newspaper) most likely respond to deal with the situation?

Newspaper managing editors were chosen as the recipients because they represent management and frequently are sources of policy. They tend to be long-term employes who have toiled earlier as city editors and assistant city editors.

Because Brunvand had stressed the notion of "urban legends" in his discussion of the Mutilated Boy and other rumors, the decision was made to eliminate the smallest newspapers from the survey on the assumption that the "more rural" or "less urban" newspapers would be less fruitful in yielding evidence of urban phenomena. A daily circulation size of 25,000 thus was chosen as a cut-off, eliminating more than two-thirds of the daily newspapers in the United States, but including nearly 500 newspapers in the

population to be sampled. Circulation figures contained in the 1986 Editor & Publisher Yearbook were used to identify newspapers of adequate daily circulation size. As it turned out, the smallest circulation paper responding to the survey and known to have carried the Mutilated Boy story was The Raleigh Times with an evening circulation of 34,732.

After the flip of a coin, every other newspaper in the Yearbook with adequate circulation was selected,yielding a sample of 236. After six deletions and one addition to the mailing sample, 231 managing editors of newspapers with daily circulations of more than 25,000 were mailed questionnaires. An Idaho newspaper of 25,000-plus daily circulation was added to the survey so that all 50 states would be represented in the mailing. Six newspapers were deleted from the sample either because their newsroom libraries already had been visited and examples of the Mutilated Boy rumor discovered, or because their editors had contributed to the questionnaire pre-testing.

The questionnaires were pre-tested using a panel of eight editors of Southern California newspapers.[22] Each was given draft copies of the questionnaires and each was interviewed in person or by telephone several days later. They suggested a number of useful changes.

Questionnaires were mailed in October, 1986, and returns were received as late as January, 1987. Eighty-six editors returned usable questionnaires, a response rate of 37 percent of the mailing. Of these, 33 responded with the Encounter Questionnaire and 53 responded with the Hypothetical Questionnaire. The 86 respondents represent about 17 percent of all U.S. newspapers with daily circulations of 25,000 or more. There was no follow-up mailing.

FINDINGS

The Encounter Questionnaire encouraged respondents to report the Mutilated Boy rumor and/or other rumors that caused widespread concern in their communities. Of the 86 editors who responded to both questionnaires, 33 reported encounters with the Mutilated Boy or similar rumors. Of these, 17, or just more than half, reported encounters with the Mutilated Boy rumor. Several editors reported encounters with more than one rumor.

The similar rumors were: the kidnapped girl (or boy), the snake in the fur coat, the fiend in the back seat (with a hatchet), an impending Halloween axe murder, a woman's finger severed by an attacker who steals her ring, homosexuals at a local university committing suicide after being forced to undergo shock treatments, the Proctor & Gamble logo is a Satanic symbol and a local Satanic cult is robbing graves and mutilating animals.

Besides the Mutilated Boy, the only other commonly encountered rumor was the kidnapped girl (or boy) rumor with nine reported instances. All other rumors were reported once, except the snake rumor; it was encountered twice.

The survey results, taken with the clippings collected before the survey began, place rumors of the Mutilated Boy in the District of Columbia and 19 states: Alabama, California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin.

The editors who encountered only the Mutilated Boy rumor were almost evenly divided on whether or not it was reported in the paper: Eight said they did report about it, nine did not. Representative reasons for not printing anything about it were: "Not widespread enough," "rumors have no

TABLE II -- THE ENCOUNTER QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

Item	Responses
1. How did you first become aware of the rumor?	
A. Readers calling the paper.	29
B. From police or from police reporter.	4
C. From TV, radio or other newspaper.	0
D. From another editor.	0
E. Other:	3
(Other--from friends or in chance conversations.)	
2. Did you (or did the city editor at the time)?	
A. Decide to assign someone to check it out.	30
B. Decide to ignore it.	1
C. Other:	5
(Other--reporter checked it out independently; checked it out myself.)	
3. When you realized that the rumor was without basis in fact, or at least nothing could be confirmed, did you?	
A. Consult other news executives before deciding whether or not to have story written.	13
B. Ask the reporter to write it before or without consultation.	4
C. Chose to let it drop without consultation.	5
D. Chose to sit tight and wait for developments.	7
E. Other:	7
(Other--updated newsroom staff only; joint decision; checked and rechecked, first decided against, later decided to print; used as a local tie-back in urban legend feature.)	
4. Did you have, or did your colleagues express, concern about possible reader reaction to:	
A. The atrocious nature of the rumored crime.	3
B. Apparent racial aspects of the rumored assault.	3
C. Combination of both A and B.	2
D. Not running a story about it.	6
E. Other:	14
(Other--no concern about special reader reaction; feared spreading the rumor; concerned about stopping the rumor; concerned that readers should know.)	

Item	Responses
5. Did your paper:	
A. Print a story (column or editorial) about it?	20
B. Decide not to print.	13
6. Does your paper have:	
A. A printed policy about printing stories based on rumors that cannot be confirmed?	3
B. An unwritten policy about them?	10
C. No policy as such, but past practice suggests: (stories printed only when very widespread, newsworthy because of public concern; won't print any rumor stories).	10
D. Paper relies on conventional wisdom of journalism that suggests: (it's a story if people are talking about it; print a story only if it is widespread; refute false rumor stories when damaging to businesses; have responsibility not to print rumor stories).	8
E. Other:	3
(Other--print rumor stories only to debunk them).	
7. If your paper printed something about it, did reader reaction?	
A. Subside, and rumor quickly died.	14
B. Story apparently caused rumor to spread even more.	0
C. Law enforcement officers particularly happy or unhappy about story.	2
D. Couldn't perceive any reader reaction.	5
E. Combination of above: (rumor died, police happy).	2

place in the paper," "would only perpetuate the rumor or fuel others" and "not our policy."

As was anticipated, the great majority of editors (29 of 33) first heard about the rumor from readers. Also as anticipated, the great majority of them either assigned someone to check it out or checked it out themselves. Responses to the third and fourth questions indicate substantial newsroom consultation from the time of the initial decision to check out the rumor to the decision to print or not to print.

The considerable array of editors' concerns about reader reaction was not anticipated. Most commonly, the editors feared they might spread the rumor if anything about it were printed, but others were concerned about reader reaction and the rumor spreading if the newspapers printed nothing.

Of the 33 responding editors, 13 reported written or unwritten policies about printing rumor stories, and 18 editors said their newspaper relied on past practice or conventional wisdom in making decisions on rumor stories.

The last question appearing on the Encounter Questionnaire generated one of the more important findings: 14 of the 20 editors who said their newspaper printed something about the rumor(s) also reported their readers quit calling and the rumors) quickly died.

The second questionnaire, the Hypothetical Questionnaire, was aimed at journalists who had not encountered the Mutilated Boy or similar rumor; 53 editors responded. Again, editors were asked to circle only the best answer but, and as with the Encounter Questionnaire, they sometimes circled more than one. It was introduced with:

This questionnaire assumed the Mutilated Boy (or similar)

rumor did not circulated in your community; it asks you to respond to a hypothetical situation:

> Assume that quite a few readers call your desk to ask why the Mutilated Boy rumor has not appeared in the paper. Some are frightened, others are angry and still others are very concerned; all or almost all of them are convinced that it occurred and that your paper has not printed it. Some readers are accusatory, and others are questioning.

Fifty-one of the 53 editors who responded to this questionnaire said they would assign someone to check out the rumor if their papers started receiving phone calls from readers. Of these, 39 indicated that ignoring rumors generally is best, but that rumors should be debunked if they create widespread hysteria. The pattern of responses indicates that newspaper editors are unlikely to search out rumors for debunking, but are likely to respond only if the rumors are widespread or very widespread, and are causing substantial community anxiety.

Similarly, 39 of the 53 responding editors said they would first discuss the matter with other editors before assigning someone to write a story about the rumor, and 35 of the 39 said they would discuss it with other news executives because it would be "sufficiently unusual" to merit it.

Many respondents selected several answers to the question of anticipated management concerns. Concern about the atrocious nature of the "assault," or its racial aspects drew the greatest concern, followed closely by questions of policy or taste.

Forty-three of the editors said the story they envision probably would emphasize either wide-spread hysteria or debunking, but would include both aspects. One of the most reassuring responses elicited by this questionnaire is that no editor said his paper might print a story saying the

TABLE III -- THE HYPOTHETICAL QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

Item	Responses
1. Would you:	
A. Assign someone to check it out.	51
B. Probably ignore it or wait and see if more people call.	2
C. Other.	1
(Other--debunk it only if rumor widespread)	
2. Would you say the best statement about rumors is:	
A. The best thing newspapers can do about rumors is to ignore them.	2
B. Newspapers serve readers better by debunking rumors.	8
C. Generally, ignoring them is best, but some rumors need to be debunked when they generate widespread fear/hysteria/ concern.	39
D. Other.	5
(Other--as in B only if widespread; as in C but only if very widespread.)	
3. If your reporter told you that police also have been receiving calls, but that they and other pertinent authorities (coroner's office, hospital officials, etc.) have no record of such an occurrence, would you:	
A. Assign a story debunking the rumor.	12
B. Assign a story reporting the substance of the rumor, but pointing out the lack of verification.	12
C. First discus it informally with other editors, or bring up at a daily news meeting.	39
D. Spike it.	5
E. Other (Or some combination of above)	13
(Other--some combination of above; probably A and C)	
4. Would you regard such a rumor as:	
A. All in a day's work, more or less routine.	8
B. Sufficiently unusual to merit conference with other news executives.	35
C. Not all that unusual, but it touches on policy.	5
D. It wouldn't be unusual except for the phone calls.	5
E. Other.	4
(Other--would decide where greater good lies; unusual; would suggest story explaing rumor just a rumor.)	

Item	Responses
5. Would you anticipate management concern about:	
A. Atrocious nature or racial aspects of the rumored crime.	18
B. Other questions of policy, taste or related concerns.	13
C. Adverse reader reaction if the newspaper declines to print anything about it.	9
D. No reader reaction in particular, but adverse effect on community if nothing printed.	8
E. Other.	4
(Other--feature on hysteria; ombudsman might handle; it's no use.)	
6. Do you think your paper might print something like:	
A. Circulating rumor, possibly true because nothing can be confirmed.	0
B. Not a rumor story at all, but primarily a debunking story related to widespread hysteria (or something approaching it).	32
C. A story about widespread public fears/hysteria, with debunking as a matter of secondary importance.	11
D. Other.	6
(Other--any of these possible; nothing unless something confirmed; short story saying rumor is false; no story; only if TV does something spectacular; Combination B and C.)	
7. Are you aware of:	
A. A written policy about unconfirmable rumors on your paper.	3
B. An unwritten policy/tradition of not printing anything about unconfirmable rumors.	3
C. A practice of making judgments on a case-by-case basis in rumor matters.	43
D. A practice of print it and see what shakes out.	1
E. Other.	2
(Other--aware of none of these; we don't print rumors.)	

Mutilated Boy rumor is circulating and, because nothing can be confirmed, is possibly true.

Only six of the 53 editors responding to this questionnaire said their newspapers had written or unwritten policies about printing rumors, but 43 said their papers made judgments on a case-by-case basis.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

"If people are talking about it, it's a story," according to Tim Demore, city editor of the Mankato, Minn., Free Press. But, to William K. Flynn, ombudsman and former news editor, past practice at The Patriot Ledger, Quincy, Mass., suggests "that we won't print a story to debunk rumors of some wild, outrageous event that never occurred."

Their remarks illustrate the range of responses to this survey, although Demore is closer to the central tendency than Flynn. The editors who encountered the Mutilated Boy called it a rumor and treated it as a rumor even though they sometimes sought out students of folklore and legend in debunking it.

One editor wrote "we already were enlightened by the urban legend books" in discussing his paper's response to the Mutilated Boy, and several others referred to books by Brunvand or Rosnow and Fine[23] as having already been reviewed in their newspapers, or used as a spin-off for a feature on rumors and urban legends, sometimes with a local rumor as an example.

Similarities of the Two Groups of Responding Editors

It isn't curious that the editors who responded to the two questionnaires were remarkably similar in their outlook and in approaches; essentially they comprise the same population. Those who favored printing a debunking story about the Mutilated Boy or similar rumors favored it for

the same reason other editors opposed printing it: responsibility to the community. Fear of spreading the rumor was an often-expressed concern by those who opposed publication, but fear of permitting it to spread was a common response of those who favored printing it. One editor, whose newspaper would not print a rumor story, simply despaired of debunking the Mutilated Boy rumor. "It's no use," he wrote.

Still another problem was related by Joan Gestl, managing editor of The News-Herald of Willoughby, Ohio. She responded, "The fact that callers said they were concerned that we were covering up the kidnapping story was more disturbing to us than the rumor itself."

Most Did (or Would) Print a Story to Stop a Rumor

Of the editors who had encountered the rumor, 30 of 33 said they assigned someone to check it out after the phone calls started coming in. Of the editors who answered the Hypothetical Questionnaire, 51 of 53 said they would assign someone to check it out, and 47 of them said would prefer to ignore, but would print it if the rumor were widespread in their communities. A much smaller proportion of the editors who encountered the Mutilated Boy or similar rumor did print something about it, 20 of 33. A comparison of the responses suggests that editors become more cautious when actually faced with the situation than when they are appraising how they might react.

Consultive Gatekeeping, Diverse Concerns

Similarly, both groups of editors were in strong agreement about discussing it with other editors. The sense of the series of questions on both questionnaires was best captured by the 33 respondents to the Hypothetical Questionnaire who said they would regard such a rumor as "sufficiently unusual to merit conferences with other news executives." Only nine of the

53 editors who responded to that questionnaire said they would find the Mutilated Boy "all in a day's work."

The editors who answered the Encounter Questionnaire said their greatest concerns about the reader reaction involved either not spreading the rumor or the necessity of stopping the rumor if they could. Of the editors who answered the hypothetical situation questionnaire, 20 said they would anticipate management concern about either adverse reader reaction or an adverse effect of the community if nothing were to be printed. They also envisioned management concern about taste, the racial nature of the rumor and the atrocious nature of the rumored attack.

Unwritten Policies and Case-by-Case Judgments

As for newsroom policy about rumors, only six editors--three in each group--said their newspapers had written policies about rumors. Among the editors who answered the Encounter Questionnair, 28 said their newspaper relied on unwritten policy, past practice or conventional journalistic wisdom in matters pertaining to rumors. Of the 53 editors who responded to the other questionnaire, 41 of 53 said their papers judged rumor situations on a case-by-case basis suggesting, as did the other questionnaire, reliance on past practice and conventional journalistic wisdom.

Printing It Can Stop It

Of the 20 editors whose newspapers printed something about the Mutilated Boy or similar rumor, only five said they could detect no reader reaction. Fourteen of the others said reaction subsided and the rumor quickly died. No one reported that the story caused the rumor to spread even more and, taken with how many reported seeing the rumor quickly die, this is one of the most satisfying findings of this study.

The summative picture is one of concerned editors who consult with others before plunging into unusual circumstances, and who would print the Mutilated Boy story to debunk it if it were widespread. They would feel some unease because it is not "business as usual," in part because there are few written policies to guide their decisions and because the crime is atrocious and commonly has inflammatory racial implications.

Enduring Fears

The fear of making matters worse is evident in the steadfast presence of the minority of editors who said they did not or would not print such a story. Patrick Graham, metropolitan editor of The Milwaukee Journal, responded with, "We don't report rumors we can't confirm, especially one as inflammatory as this."

Joe Stinnett, managing editor of The News and The Daily Advance, both of Lynchburg, Va., wrote in a note that accompanied his returned questionnaire:

> One reason we rarely print anything about a rumor was not covered on your forms. I believe that any publication of a rumor, even in a story debunking it, often has the effect of giving the rumor credence. Many people don't read the paper very closely, and I think there's no point in responding to a rumor unless, as you say in the questionnaire, it is creating fear and hysteria.

Little Evidence that the Press Spreads Rumors

The fear that the press speads rumors may be found almost as an article of faith among some scholars as well as some editors, but this study produced little evidence to support it and considerable evidence to refute it. Only in the Detroit case of the Windsor Star is there evidence suggesting a newspaper account contributed to the spread of a dangerous rumor. It

printed the huge Benday screen "rumor" overlaying the body type, but it is a reasonable guess that many read through it without noticing. Moreover, it goes without saying that some rumors prove true. A hindsight guess is that "false rumor" might have been more effective than "rumor." The case serves as a reminder that merely labeling something "rumor" is insufficient to stop it.

"How You Say It and How You Play It"

"How you say it and how you play it" is a journalistic aphorism about story content, display and placement in the newspaper; it is a cornerstone in discussing news treatment. Most of the headlines already cited in this study established clearly and forcefully the falsity of the rumor, as did all the stories. Most of them were either Page 1 or on the first page of another section, and most of them were multi-column headlines. Most of the stories cited several authorities in debunking the Mutilated Boy.

The combination of unambiguous writing and good display on a prominent page most certainly contributed to the successful debunking of the Mutilated Boy rumor. Somewhere and somehow, though, he and his relatives, such as the Kidnapped Girl, surely will endure beyond any newspaper debunking. The best way to shorten the next visit appears to be prompt, thorough and prominent refutation by the press.

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